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ABSTRACT

Student teaching is the most powerful experience in the preservice preparation of teachers. Researchers have noted that during the student teaching experience, the norms of the university are quickly supplanted by the norms of the public school. This research is designed to examine the perspective that student teachers adopt toward teaching social studies in elementary schools. Particular concerns include: (1) the students' definitions of the purpose of social studies; (2) their views of the relative status of social studies in the elementary curriculum; and (3) the students' views of their cooperating teachers. The sample of students interviewed for this study consists of elementary education majors from two universities who had completed student teaching and who had taught at least one social studies unit. It was found that most of the students recognized the relationship of social studies to citizenship, but they interpreted good citizenship to be synonymous with classroom demeanor and deportment. Most of the students learned through student teaching that social studies is a low priority subject, approached less than enthusiastically by cooperating teachers and not prized by the school. Students' opinions of cooperating teachers were positive, and these teachers were viewed as sources of critical knowledge. Those educators in charge of preservice teachers should give greater attention to student teaching and how social studies is viewed in the schools. Careful attention should be given to the selection of cooperating teachers. (SM)

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Student Teacher Perceptions of Elementary School Social Studies: The Social Construction of Curriculum

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Student teaching is the most powerful experience in the preservice preparation of teachers. During student teaching, students learn not only how to teach but they redefine their professional knowledge about curriculum, students, and the nature of the job. Although designed to be a culminating experience, student teaching is often considered discontinuous with other elements in teacher education programs. Undergraduates, for example, typically report that other education courses failed to prepare them adequately for the classroom and that they did not learn about teaching or how to behave as a teacher until student teaching. Teacher educators, on the other hand, complain that during student teaching, students quickly loose their ability to think critically about the schools and teaching in a desperate search for techniques to keep order and present instruction (Lanier & Little, 1987).

Previous research indicates that most student teachers want to behave as practitioners behave; they are eager to fit into the roles of teachers as they are modeled by cooperating teachers and others in the schools (Lacey, 1977; Popkewitz, 1987; Tabachnick, Popkewitz, & Zeichner, 1979-1980; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985). Several researchers have noted, perhaps a bit forlornly, that during student teaching the norms of the university are quickly supplanted by the norms of the public schools (Kulman & Hoy, 1974; Palonsky & Nelson, 1980).

Although students may begin student teaching with a set of goals and teaching approaches that resemble their professors,' they complete student teaching closely reflecting the public

school teachers with whom they worked. Typically, researchers have regarded the abandonment of university norms as an unmindful capitulation to the status quo, a product largely of the students' inadequate preparation or of their inherent political conservatism and social conformity (Lortie, 1975; Waller, 1932). Indeed, functionalist research seemed unconcerned with the reasons why new teachers become less flexible, less creative, and more dogmatic. Perhaps it was considered inevitable, an unfortunate shortcoming of teachers, a profession, which was in Waller's words, too often the haven for "unsaleable men and unmarriageable women."

More recently, researchers have examined the processes by which students develop the perspective of teachers. These researchers view students not merely as neophytes to be socialized into appropriate roles and ideological orientations; students are seen as dynamic actors in their world who interpret their work and invest it with meaning (see: Adler, 1984; Blase, 1985; Goodman & Adler, 1985; Ross, 1987; Tabachnick, Popkewitz & Zeichner, 1979 - 1980; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1984).

The present research is designed to examine the perspectives students develop toward teaching social studies in elementary schools. Particular concerns include: the students' definition of the purposes of social studies, their view of the relative status of social studies in the elementary curriculum, and the students' view of their cooperating teachers. In short, we wanted to find out what students thought about the

social studies, and we wanted to examine the process through which students developed their perspectives of the field.

Perspective is considered here as an ordered view of one's social world. A person's perspective is a set of behaviors and beliefs about those behaviors that are socially constructed and maintained through the daily patterns of people's lives (Cicourel, 1974; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The perspective that student teachers develop about the social studies is considered a social product, one which is negotiated between student and cooperating teacher in the context of the school and with the background of the university experience.

Although the meaning students learn to assign a given field is a social product born of the struggles of multiple participants, it is not a fair fight. In the case of the social construction of the social studies, the students are disadvantaged by the relative power of the cooperating teache the limited role played by the university, and their own desire to fit in, to be good student teachers as modeled and defined by cooperating teachers.

The sample of students interviewed for this study consists of elementary education majors from two universities who had completed student teaching and who had taught at least one social studies unit. Twenty-nine students were selected from school A from the class of 1987 and winter 1988. (This includes all but three of the students from the population of interest). A comparison non random sample (n= 12) from the class of 1987 was

drawn from school B. Both schools are public institutions located in adjacent midwestern states. School A is a doctoral-granting state university with an enrollment of about 22,000 students. Elementary education majors often take more than 50 percent of the classes in education with a major emphasis on methods courses. Students take three courses in the teaching of reading, three courses designed for elementary math teachers, and one methods course each in science, social studies, music, art, and physical education. School B is a state college enrolling approximately 12,000 students. Elementary education majors take 74 hours in education, including 12 semester hours of student teaching, and as many as three "methods" courses in the social studies (e.g., Teaching Social Studies for Involvement: Simulation Games and Activities; Teaching Social Studies for Environmental Understanding; Teaching Social Studies for Global Understanding; Teaching Social Studies for an Understanding of Legal Concepts). At neither institution does the faculty typically supervise student teachers.

(It may be of interest to note that in school A, elementary education majors are given a choice of grade level for student teaching. The most frequently requested grades are second and third. As one student said, at that age children are "above the baby sitting age and below the police age." Another student told us that she preferred third grade because, "In second grade they're not independent enough . . . in third grade, they have enough independency (sic) to be on their own." A few students

expressed fear of the command of content needed to teach upper elementary grades and the potential for those students to be disruptive. A student who had taught second grade said,

> They (second graders) still see the teacher as an authority figure without having to make them think you are. They think you're wonderful right off the bat and they're old enough that they can read and write fairly well so you can do a lot with them and they don't talk back like 6th graders do. (School A, 2nd grade, 1987)

An interview schedule was developed and pilot tested in at school A and revised. Similar interviews were conducted independently at both schools, recorded on audio tape, transcribed, collated and compared. Three of the major questions are examined in this paper.

<u>How did students define their relationship with their cooperating teacher</u>?

Asked to describe their relationship with their cooperating teacher, students responses were uniformly positive and often glowing. "Wonderful," "Super," "Very Good," "Real good," "Great," "Honest and Open, "The Best," they told us. The first response to our question was always positive, often superlative. Smiling, cheerful students gushed and heaped praise and approbation on their cooperating teachers. Subsequent

questions and probes forced students to reflect on specific qualities of their cooperating teachers, and a few conceded that although they really "loved" their cooperating teacher they could be described as "unimaginative," "intimidating," "rigid," "closed minded," "burned out," and "not always as helpful as they could be."

For the most part, however, the students preferred to view their cooperating teachers uncritically. Even though most of them could cite dozens of points of disagreement, and a few could point to serious shortcoming in their cooperating teachers, they recognized the influence these people had on their own teaching style and skills and they were appreciative. They told us that they knew their cooperating teachers better than they knew their education professors; they liked their cooperating teachers, and they were protective of the relationship. The students had developed a bond that was far stronger than the bond between professor and student, and asking them to be critical of their cooperating teacher was probably not unlike asking them about their relationship with their spouse or their family. (The cooperating teachers also thought well of the students: All of the students in both schools received A grades for student teaching.)

The cooperating teachers had the practical knowledge the students wanted. The cooperating teacher knew how to plan instruction, develop teaching strategies, and manage classroom discipline. It was better knowledge than the students had been

given at the university; it was of more immediate use. Students typically denounced university education courses as "too idealistic" and "not practical." One student from school B said that in methods courses they had been encouraged to use simulation games, field trips, and hands-on experiences. However, she said,

> (t)he reality (of the school) was quite different. It was read and take a test. The (cooperating) teacher was so concerned about piling information into the kids' heads, there wasn't time for much else.

A student from school A said:

> I didn't learn much in my methods courses. The main thing that helped me teach was student teaching itself. I wish we had four years of student teaching and eight weeks of class.

<u>What's a social studies</u>?

The researchers taught the social studies methods courses the students had taken. Both courses represented social studies as citizenship education, a political part of the curriculum in ways far beyond electoral politics. The social studies was to present to children concepts of justice, fairness, human rights, and human dignity....

During the interviews, students were asked to define the

purposes of social studies based on their experiences as student teachers. The results are highly varied, and although some students could answer easily, others were thrown into a terrible alarm by the question. As one student said when asked to define the subject she had just been teaching,

> I don't know exactly . . . I was open for discussion; the kids were just wonderful for that. (Was that part of social studies?) Oh, yes! To be civilized; to take turns; now, that to me is part of social studies . . . (Is there more to the social studies?) Oh, yes. Taking notes. We told the kids that this is what they would need for junior high school. They loved it, thought it was real grown up. (School A, 4th grade, 1987)

Most students recognized the relationship of social studies to citizenship, but they typically interpreted good citizenship to be synonymous with classroom demeanor and deportment. As one respondent noted,

> (Social studies) is communication, getting along with others. Kids cooperate during activities. We really stress that a lot. Taking turns, that sort of thing. . . That's how countries can get along." (School A, 4th, 1987)

Most of those who mentioned electoral politics did so in conserving terms:

> I think it's important that the kids realize (that our elected officials) are not that bad, that we did choose them and we have to stick by them until something else can be done . . . Have faith until election time. (School A, 4th grade, 1988).

Student responses reveal no general definition for the social studies. Their answers are idiosyncratic reflections of what they taught at a specific grade level. There is no recognizable pattern or constellation of what the social studies is, nothing that unites the 7 years of disparate experiences children are exposed to. Student teachers who had worked in grade 2 viewed social studies as those experiences that make you aware of how different families live. Student teachers who had worked in grade 6 saw social studies as chronological political history. It may resemble Hannah's expanding horizons, but the concentric circles of experience seem to be unrelated to one another.

<u>What is the status of social studies and how did it get that way?</u>

Reading is the new religion of public schools. Although there is no agreement concerning what is the one true faith,

belief in the primacy of reading as a school subject is almost without challenge. School A is dominated by whole langauge reading instruction; school B is more eclectic with a heavier emphasis on skills. The various approaches to reading were not lost on the students, and they seemed more familiar with controversies surrounding reading than they were with disputes about the social studies. They also seemed deeply committed to the need to teach reading. "It's basic to everything else," one student told us. "Everything, including social studies, is really a reading activity," another said. "When I was in (elementary) school, social studies was round-robin reading and it's still that way and probably always will be."

Students reported that after reading, the most important school subjects were: other language arts areas (e.g., spelling), and math. Science and social studies competed for last place.

When asked to explain how they learned this hierarchical arrangement, students seemed perplexed. They reported that the relative importance of subjects was not discussed openly in their schools, and none could recall a conversation with cooperating teachers about why certain subjects dominated the curriculum. They inferred the relative importance given social studies from their college experience and the culture of the school. For example, social studies was often the last subject taught in the day and the first to be dropped if there was an assembly or a shortened day. It was for many of the students the first subject

they were allowed to teach. As one said,

> If we screwed it up, it didn't matter much. . . Social studies doesn't seem important because there are so many people in it. Math and science, on the other hand, have shortages so it must be important - - and they're difficult. (School A, 5th grade, 1987)

Another student told us that her cooperating teacher always checked her lesson plans in reading and math but rarely in science and never in social studies. She quickly learned an important lesson of the elementary school: social studies doesn't matter.

Students often struggled when asked if science or social studies was more valued in the elementary school, but they most often ranked science as more important for a variety of reasons. One student said,

> There was no one in the school who was highlighted as an expert in teaching social studies. (We had a science specialist). (Teaching) packets like we had in science would make social studies teaching easier. (School A, 5th grade, 1988).

Another said,

> Social studies is hard to teach. Math follows the book and science had packets, but social studies

> was hard to teach. Social studies is just things you run into daily." (School A, 2nd grade, 1987)

Some students told us that social studies was difficult to teach, in part, because of a lack of congruence between their methods courses and their student teaching experience. As one student said,

> My cooperating teacher began to refer to what I termed social studies as history. . . I imagined social studies to be more of a broader aspect, a combination of social and the historical, people as they were, as they are . . . Methods class viewed social studies from the view of the environment, a global view. . . I wasn't prepared for what I got (in student teaching). I got more history. (School B, 5th grade, 1987)

Another student said,

> (School B) taught me to be creative, but I couldn't use it in the classroom. For example. I planned an outdoor education experience and it got cancelled and I was discouraged from rescheduling it. . . The reality was read the book and take a test. (School B, fifth grade, 1987)

According to another student:

> My social studies methods courses were beneficial. Lots of times though (during student teaching) I couldn't use anything. My resident coordinator wanted to see the kids sitting in their seats, busy and quiet. Lots of my social studies stuff you couldn't use because it meant too much (student) involvement and my supervisor wanted to see complete classroom control."
>
> (School B, 3rd grade, 1987)

Most of the students learned through student teaching that social studies was a low priority subject, devoid of political content, approached less than enthusiastically by cooperating teachers, and not prized by the school. It was also a subject which they taught with methods deemed inappropriate by their methods courses.

However, many of the students (about one-third) had very good experiences with social studies, and for these students the cooperating teacher was the essential variable. Students who developed positive views of the social studies told us about cooperating teachers who knew how to overcome the constraints of desiccated textbooks and mind-numbing work sheets. One student told us,

> My cooperating teacher really liked social studies . . . He took a lot of history course in college.

> We used (a production simulation game) and (law-related education strategies) . . . He got the kids to write about current events and we did a big economics unit. I liked teaching social studies more than I thought I would. (School A, 5th grade, 1987).

We heard about many good teaching strategies and about teachers who appeared to understand something of the nature of social studies and the subtlety of preparing elementary students for democratic citizenship. While few, if any of the cooperating teachers, conveyed to student teachers a full measure of the political nature of the social studies, they were able to give them a sense of enthusiasm for the subject and a notion of its worth.

It seems to us that those of us in social studies need to give greater attention to student teaching and the ways in subjects are considered and presented. Clearly some teachers were better than others in passing on to students a sense of social studies and an enthusiasm for the field. We are not sure what the remedy is for all of the problems of teaching social studies in elementary schools, but our data suggest that we cannot afford to be inattentive to the selection of cooperating teachers or unmindful of the ways in which students learn to apply university knowledge to school experiences.

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